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ABSTRACT

Chinese students and teachers perceive a different pattern of relationships between academic ability and effort than do American students and teachers. This study of the effect of teachers' evaluative behavior on the perceived academic ability and effort of Chinese students replicates a study by Meyer (1979) using American students. The sample consisted of 599 Chinese elementary, secondary, and university students, and 96 teachers. Subjects were asked to evaluate a series of scenarios in which a teacher either praised a student performance, blamed a student for failure, or gave a neutral response to student performance on tasks of varying difficulty. Chinese students were found to be similar to American students in that they perceived that success in difficult tasks indicated higher ability and effort than those in easy ones, and failure in easy tasks indicated lower ability and effort than in difficult ones. Also, task difficulty was an important cue for ability and effort levels among older students, but success or failure was the cue for ability and effort among younger students. However, ability and effort are very closely related for Chinese students, but are perceived as two separate entities by American students. A list of 13 references and three tables of statistical data are appended. (FMW)

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Informational Value of Teachers' Evaluative Behavior on Perceived Ability and Effort Among Chinese Students

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Abstract

In a series of experiment, Meyer et al. (1979) asked subjects to indicate the perceived ability and effort levels of students who were praised (blamed or received neutral feedback) for their success (failure). For older students, praise (vs. neutral feedback) after success and neutral feedback (vs. blame) after failure led to the perception of low ability. The present study replicated Meyer et al.'s study with 655 Chinese students (G.1 to university) in Hong Kong. In congruence with Western studies, younger Chinese students perceived that students praised for success had higher ability, whereas those blamed for failure had lower ability. However, contrary to Meyer et al.'s findings, in both the easy and difficult tasks, older Chinese children did not find the blamed students as higher in ability than those with neutral feedback. The results were explained in terms of the maturity in the conceptions of ability and effort, as well as of the cultural differences in the perceptions of individual causes.

Informational Value of Teachers' Evaluative Behavior on Perceived Ability and Effort Among Chinese Students

In addition to researches on the direct effects of praise on learning and performance, there have been attempts to examine how teachers' praise or evaluative feedback provide information about students' ability and effort level. In a series of experiments, Meyer et al. (1979) asked German subjects to indicate the perceived ability and effort levels of students who were praised or blamed (or received neutral feedback) for their performance. For older students, praise (vs. neutral feedback) after success and neutral feedback (vs. blame) after failure led to the perception of low ability. For younger primary school students, the perception was reversed, praise after success denoted higher ability.

It is argued that to all students praise denotes high effort expenditure whereas blame leads to the inference of low effort. Moreover, older students are more aware of the compensatory relation between effort and ability; students with high ability do not have to spend as much effort to succeed (Barker & Graham, 1990; Meyer et al., 1979; Nicholls, 1978; Nicholls & Miller, 1983).

Meyer et al.'s findings were replicated by Barker and Graham (1987) whose subjects were children aged 4 to 12 in the U.S.A. Based on research reporting that causal

ascriptions are used differentially in different cultures (Hau & Salili, 1990, in press; Salili, Maehr, & Gillmore, 1976), and literature showing that Chinese child rearing and education are generally harsher and more authoritarian than those in the West (Ho, 1986), Salili, Hwang, and Choi (1989) replicated Meyer et al.'s study with Chinese students in Hong Kong. Contrary to Meyer et al.'s (1979) and Barker and Graham's (1987) findings with older students, no difference in perceived ability was noted in most of the situations examined.

Graham and Barker (1990) have examined another seemingly positive behavior which might lead to unintentional undermining functions. It has been shown that help is offered or withheld depending on the perceived controllability of cause of the need. Help is generally given for need caused by uncontrollable factors. Children age 5 to 12 were shown videotapes in which teachers and peers gave unsolicited help to one student but not to another. Results showed that unsolicited help was a low-ability and high-effort cue, especially among older students. It was also found that older students perceived the helped students as less proud of their success, more grateful, less likely to be successful in the future, and less preferable as a workmate.

In a summative review, Meyer (1982) pointed out that some apparently positive behavicrs might have unintended

negative consequence whereas some negative behaviors might have positive consequence. This was exemplified through three types of behavior: teachers' praise (vs. blame), help-giving (neglect), and pity (anger). As praise are maximized when performance is ascribed to high effort, success will be especially praised when the person is perceived as low in ability (thus having spent high effort). Similarly, failure will be blamed for those perceived to be high in ability. Thus, praise and blame can be use as informational cues to infer the ability level of a target subject. Praise (vs. neutral feedback) for success implies lower ability whereas blame (vs. neutral feedback) for failure implies higher ability.

Meyer (1982) cautioned that the above findings did not advocate that praise, helping, or positive emotional reactions had invariability negative consequences. Nevertheless, these results pointed out the important role of these behaviors in informing people how their ability levels were being evaluated. It was found that Chinese students were quite learning oriented and attributed their performance much to their own effort (Hau & Salili, 1989, 1990). Such learning attitude may affect their perception of teachers' evaluative feedback. Furthermore, in Salili et al.'s (1989) study, the subjects were mature tertiary level students. Therefore, it would be meaningful to examine how teachers' praise and blame affect Chinese students'

perception of their ability and effort at various educational levels.

Method

Subjects

The sample consisted of 559 students and 96 teachers of various educational levels in Hong Kong. There were approximately equal number of males and females in each educational level: 46 G.1/2 (23 M, 23 F), 55 G.3/4 (25 M, 30 F), 70 G.5/6 (32 M, 38 F), 108 G.7/8 (48 M, 60 F), 115 G.9/10 (60 M, 55 F), 81 G.11/12 (38 M, 43 F), 84 university (37 M, 47 F), and 96 teachers (49 M, 47 F). The average ages of the subjects in the seven educational groups were 7.6, 9.5, 10.8, 13.6, 15.1, 16.9, 24.8 and 29.7 respectively. Most of the students were living in government housing estates and came from families of middle socioeconomic class.

Instrument

Scenarios similar to those described in Meyer et al.'s (1979), or Salili et al.'s (1990) studies were used. Each subject received a set of four scenarios which depicted a combination of different task difficulty level (easy, difficult) and outcome (success/failure). In each scenario, teachers' evaluation (praise/no praise for success, blame/no blame for failure) to the two students were different. For example, in scenario 1,

Both students Wong and Chan got the correct answer in an easy problem. The teacher praised Wong but not Chan. What is in the teacher's mind?

a. Are they hard working?

	very hard working <----> very lazy								
Wong	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Chan	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9

b. Are they high or low in ability ?

	very high <---> very low								
Wong	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Chan	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9

Procedure

The instrument was group-administered to the students (in small groups at elementary level). The researcher explained slowly the scenarios and the questions. The order of the four scenarios were randomized.

Results

Four separate 8 Educational level X 2 Task (easy vs. difficult) X 2 Feedback (praise/blame vs. neutral) three-way ANOVAs were performed on students' perceived effort and ability levels for success and failure respectively. Educational level was a between whereas task and feedback were within-subject measure.

Insert Tables 1 and 2 here

Feedback

The effects due to feedback were significant in three of the four ANOVAs. For the ability judgment, it was found that in both easy and difficulty tasks, younger children (G.1/2) perceived that students praised for success had higher ability, and those blamed for failure had lower ability. However, older subjects tended to perceive that students praised for success had lower ability (G.9/10, university students, and teachers for easy task; G.5-10, teachers for difficult task).

The main effect of feedback was not significant for failure in ability judgment. Nevertheless, detailed analyses showed that in both easy and difficulty tasks, young children perceived that those students blamed for failure were lower in ability. Teachers also perceived that in both easy and difficult tasks, these students blamed for failure were higher in ability.

For the effort judgment, all subjects perceived that students praised for success had higher effort than those receiving neutral feedback. They also found that students blamed for failure had lower effort than those receiving neutral feedback, which was particularly strong for easy task and among students in G.1/2 and G.9 upwards.

Task

The significant effect due to task showed that success in difficult task indicated higher ability and effort than

those in easy task, particularly for older students (G.3 upwards for ability, and G.5 upwards for effort). Similarly, failure in easy task indicated lower ability and effort than in difficult task, particularly for older students (G.3 upwards) and when the students were blamed.

Educational level

Significant effects due to educational level showed that in success conditions, older students (P.3 upwards) perceived higher ability for neutral feedback (particularly for difficult task) and lower ability for praise (particularly for easy task) than the younger ones.

Older students (P.3 upwards) also perceived lower ability for neutral feedback in failure (particularly for easy task) than the younger ones. For both success and failure, the effects due to educational level in effort judgment were all nonsignificant.

Effort-Ability Relations

Barker and Graham (1987) hypothesized that young children did not perceive a compensatory relation between effort and ability. Thus, positive correlations between young children's effort and ability ratings were anticipated. Whereas, for older children, negative associations were anticipated because of the compensatory schema. Their results, correlations between effort and ability, as compared with the present study are listed in Table 3.

Insert Table 3 here

From the table, it can be seen that Chinese students and teachers were different to those in the U.S. in that effort and ability perceptions were always positively correlated, students working hard were always more able, and vice versa. It should be pointed out that such relationship was weaker in older students (similar to U.S. findings). Nevertheless, the inverse relationship was never so strong that the two variables become negatively related. This showed a different pattern of relationship between effort and ability judgment as compared with the U.S. findings.

Discussion and Conclusion

In the scenarios, tasks of two difficulty levels were used. As expected, students perceived that success in difficult tasks indicated higher ability and effort than those in easy ones, and failure in easy tasks indicated lower ability and effort than in difficult ones. Task difficulty as a cue for ability and effort level was important among older students (usually G.3 upwards). For the younger ones, performance, either success or failure, was students' main concern in ability and effort assessment.

Congruence as well as disparate results as compared with those reported in other cultures were shown. Results on effort judgment replicated those by Meyer et al. (1979),

or by Barker and Graham (1987). Chinese children at all educational levels perceived that students praised for success had higher effort, whereas those blamed for failure had lower effort.

In the perception of ability, the results in the present study generally agreed with those in other Western cultures. Younger Chinese children perceived that students praised for success had higher ability, and those blamed for failure had lower ability. The trend tended to reverse for older students.

However, contrary to Meyer et al.'s or Barker and Graham's results, in both the easy and difficult tasks, older Chinese children did not find the blamed students as higher in ability than those with neutral feedback. Nevertheless, these results were in line with those reported by Salili et al. (1989) with Chinese tertiary level students.

An examination of the correlations between effort and ability ratings as shown in Table 3 also revealed cross-cultural differences. For Chinese students, effort and ability ratings were always positively correlated. Though the relationship was weaker in older students (similar to U.S. findings), the inverse relationship was never so strong that they became negatively related.

The strong linkage between effort and ability in the Chinese students was also shown in a study which explored

Chinese students' perception of the semantic meaning of individual causes (Hau & Salili, in press). For Chinese students, ability and effort are very closely related (not as too separate entities as in the West). People working hard have higher ability and those who have high ability must have worked hard. In terms of causal dimensional meaning, ability and effort are both very internal, controllable, stable and global. Such strong linkage between ability and effort overrides any implication of teachers' feedback on students' ability level.

All in all, a strong linkage between teachers' evaluative feedback and students' perceived ability and effort levels was shown. However, these results have to be explained in terms of the maturity in the conceptions of ability and effort, as well as of the cultural differences in the perceptions of individual causes.

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Table 1
Ability and Effort Judgment[a] of Students Receiving Praise/Blame Feedback

Task/ Judgment/ Feedback	Mean							
	G.1/2	G.3/4	G.5/6	G.7/8	G.9/10	G.11/12	Univ.	Teacher
SUCCESS - ABILITY JUDGMENT								
Easy Task								
Neutral	-.11	.24	.26	.25	.38	.12	.14	.28
Praise	.88	.66	.20	.05	-.34	.04	-.52	-.82
t-value	-4.90**	-2.27	.29	1.73	6.13**	.47	5.50**	9.78**
Difficult Task								
Neutral	.09	.60	1.03	.88	.90	.75	1.01	1.14
Praise	.85	.81	.47	.54	.43	.82	.81	.12
t-value	-4.81**	-1.24	3.52*	3.16*	3.63**	-.43	1.52	7.50**
SUCCESS - EFFORT JUDGMENT								
Easy Task								
Neutral	-.06	.15	-.10	.02	-.12	-.05	-.01	-.10
Praise	.87	.49	.46	.50	.56	.57	.41	.52
t-value	-4.51**	-1.51	-2.98*	-3.52**	-5.92**	-4.56**	-2.87*	-4.56**
Difficult Task								
Neutral	-.07	.47	.70	.47	.23	.52	.62	.47
Praise	.66	.78	.90	.91	1.05	1.06	1.20	1.00
t-value	-4.63**	-2.06	-1.25	-3.91**	-7.66**	-3.71**	-5.35**	-3.98**
FAILURE - ABILITY JUDGMENT								
Easy Task								
Neutral	-.10	-.52	-.69	-.71	-.69	-.41	-.63	-.63
Blame	-1.01	-.80	-.56	-.50	-.34	-.71	-.78	-.22
t-value	5.86**	1.96	-.85	-1.67	-2.60	1.75	1.11	-2.66*
Difficult Task								
Neutral	.06	-.25	-.50	-.36	-.28	-.13	-.13	-.13
Blame	-.66	-.76	-.14	-.15	-.06	-.41	.12	.22
t-value	4.26**	3.88**	-2.02	-1.71	-1.57	1.72	-1.67	-2.52*
FAILURE - EFFORT JUDGMENT								
Easy Task								
Neutral	-.00	-.31	-.44	-.52	-.25	-.30	-.58	-.10
Blame	-.94	-.77	-.87	-.80	-.95	-1.00	-1.03	-1.20
t-value	5.52**	2.68*	2.63	2.32	5.19**	4.63**	3.47*	9.00**
Difficulty Task								
Neutral	.19	-.24	-.26	-.17	-.02	-.06	-.06	.06
Blame	-.65	-.59	-.39	-.40	-.50	-.72	-.52	-.64
t-value	5.20**	2.37	.73	1.88	3.74**	4.44**	2.90*	5.03**

[a] scores standardized within individual, high score indicates high effort or ability.
*$p < .01$, **$p < .001$.

Table 2

F-Values of Educational Level X Task X Feedback ANOVAs

Outcome/ Judgment	Edu 1	Task 2	Feedback 3	1x2	1x3	2x3	1x2x3
Success							
Ability	7.47**	380.27**	18.09**	13.01**	19.07**	.78	3.19**
Effort	2.67	184.52**	138.08**	6.89**	1.58	.98	1.16
Failure							
Ability	7.24**	171.62**	.41	4.01**	8.19**	1.28	1.88
Effort	2.35	97.60**	133.06**	1.47	3.84**	7.37*	.96

* $p < .01$, ** $p < .001$.

Table 3

Correlations between Effort and Ability Perception

	U.S. children Barker, Graham			Chinese children present study	
	praise/blame[a]		unsolicited		
Age/Education	success	failure	help[b]	success	failure
5-year-olds	.84	.86	.94		
6-7-year-olds			.71	.69	.65
8-9-year-olds	.24	.55	.52	.57	.62
11-year-olds	-.79	-.82	-.39	.60	.57
G.7/8				.40	.40
G.9/10				.13	.29
G.11/12				.43	.50
university				.37	.43
teachers				.08	.04

[a]Figures from Barker & Graham (1987).
[b]Figures from Graham & Barker (1990).